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Old Main Gala Reopening

State University of New York College at Cortland

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Gala Reopening **OLD MAIN**
DIAMOND JUBILEE



SUNY Cortland Celebrates
The Gala Reopening of Old Main



AFTER NEARLY 70 YEARS

of steady use by thousands of college students and training school pupils, followed by five years of rehabilitation, the stately old building atop Court Street hill returns to full participation in campus life and resumes its role as a center of academic and aesthetic activity on campus. An entire class of SUNY Cortland students has come and gone without firsthand experience of Old Main, missing out on the link the old building supplies between past and present students.

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the Diamond Jubilee celebration of Old Main — the College's crown jewel and architectural cornerstone.

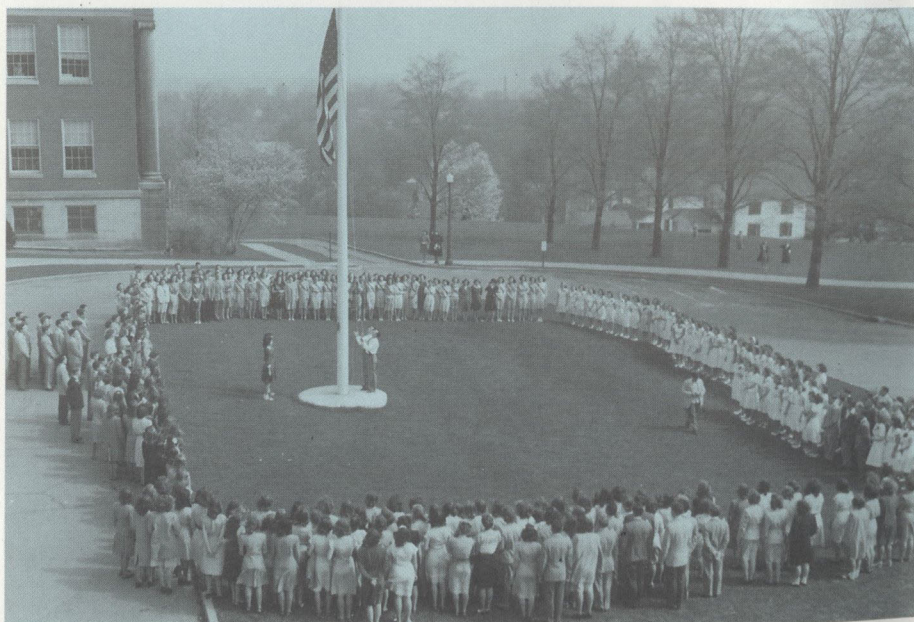
The five-year renovation of Old Main has produced a modernized facility which we hope will serve the SUNY Cortland campus well for many years to come.

This gala reopening provides an appropriate occasion for reflection upon the significance of Old Main in the life of our institution. Its treasured classrooms, offices, nooks and crannies have borne witness to the College's great expansion during the 20th century.

More than just bricks and mortar, Old Main has earned a special niche in the hearts of our graduates. It's a place of honor as coveted as the lifelong intellectual and social relationships which were fostered within its majestic walls. For some alumni, Old Main is Cortland.

Now, we have readied Old Main for a new generation of students and faculty and for the next millennium, when her timeless majesty and enduring appeal will continue to welcome home Cortland's daughters and sons.

Judson H. Taylor
President



Moving Up Day—1940s



When Old Main, "the show school of the state," was new

The drive to build Old Main began when Harry DeWitt DeGroat became principal of the Normal School in 1912. The young executive soon complained that the original 45-year-old school building between Church and Greenbush Streets was antiquated, inadequate, unsafe and totally unsatisfactory. By 1916, the State Education Department, responsible for all the New York normal schools, agreed and in 1917 initiated the search for a site upon which to build the new home for the school. Three locations were proposed: the original site in what is now Court House Park (deemed too small by most), Randall Flats, an area south of Port Watson Street, (too near the city's industrial sector, said others), and the top of Court Street hill (thought too exposed and difficult of access). After nearly two years of deliberation during which the original structure was destroyed by fire in February 1919 — even as the community was planning the 50th anniversary of the school — the State Education Department announced that the new school would be built on the 30-acre hill site.



The classic beauty of Old Main's architecture



Campus School students imitate the College's marching band

Most of the College's formal functions took place in what is now known as Brown Auditorium



CONSTRUCTION OF OLD MAIN BEGAN IN 1921 AFTER A

delay caused by a faulty appropriation bill and a design change. The three separate buildings originally planned were consolidated into a single structure of three elements; a central section with wings north and south of the center, along Graham Avenue.

The north wing was devoted to the Training School where prospective teachers first practiced their craft and hundreds of Cortland children learned their ABCs. The south wing housed classrooms and faculty offices, with a modern swimming pool in the basement. The center contained administrative offices, an auditorium, the library, art classrooms, and a gymnasium. Adjacent to the gymnasium were locker room and shower facilities of the most modern design for both men and women.

Behind the building was a large athletic field plagued by poor drainage. The football team played under the most muddy conditions imaginable for years before the installation of proper drainage corrected the problem. Another, slightly lower field, was created a few years later just beyond the original.

The builders turned the structure over to the eager faculty and students in the fall of 1923. A grand opening celebration and "illumination night" drew more than 7,000 curious visitors, half the population of the city at the time, to the building. It was a completely self-contained school, equipped for a modern physical education program as well as for training teachers for the state's elementary schools. It was called "the show school of the state" by the envious principal of a sister normal school.

THE GYMNASIUM TEEMED WITH CAMPUS ACTIVITIES.

Dance teacher Mary Washington Ball held reviews there, Francis Moench's '16 basketball team played there, and physical education activity classes filled the gym most hours of the day. Student dances, hosted by Principal DeGroat who loved to dance, occupied the floor on Friday nights. During the summer, dances were sometimes held in the first floor lobby of Old Main. Newell "Spiegle" Willcox brought his dance band to campus on several occasions.

The auditorium hosted many notables through the years. Amelia Earhart held a capacity audience enthralled when she spoke during the 1920s. Vincent Price brought his ghoulish charm to a student audience in the '50s. Almost every modern dancer of note graced the auditorium stage during the '20s and '30s, thanks to Professor Ball.

ENROLLMENT PEAKED AT JUST UNDER

1,000 students in the late '20s before dropping off during the Depression of the 1930s. In 1944 there were fewer than 400 students, mostly female, during this second year of Donnal V. Smith's presidency and third year of World War II. With the end of the war and the return of the veterans, the building was soon hard pressed to serve the growing student body.

OLD MAIN MEMORY

"Attending college for the four years that Cortland became practically a female seminary. The men returning from the war in 1945—happy day!"

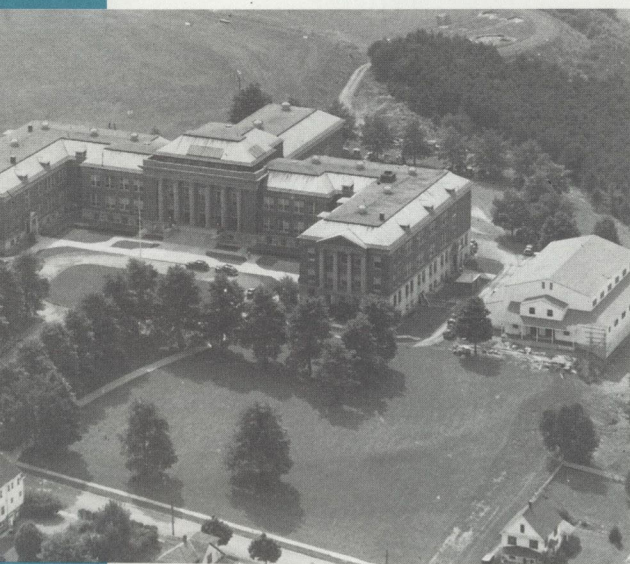
Roberta Baker Harris '45



Longtime faculty member Martha Washington Ball brought modern dance to generations of Cortland students



Art Department Chair H. Kenyon Stell instructs students on the third floor of Old Main



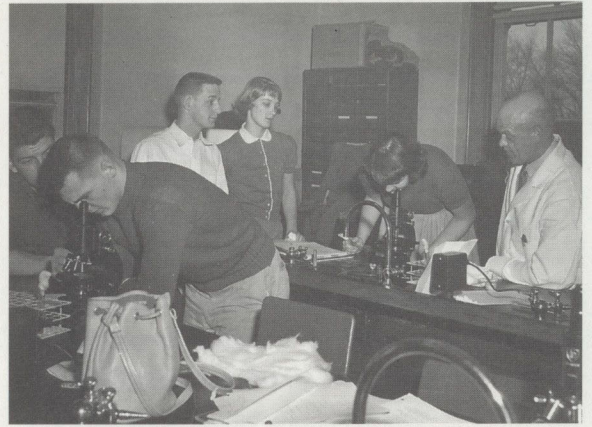
The Gym Annex, to the right of Old Main, was the site of the College's post-World War II basketball successes. The "temporary" building, which also contained some faculty offices, was torn down in 1967 after 20 years of use.

War surplus buildings provided much-needed additional facilities. A small six-room building provided additional classrooms and a wooden gymnasium obtained from a closed Army base provided more room for basketball games and physical education activity classes. Both were erected north of the building in an area which is now a parking lot. Another war surplus building between Old Main and the president's residence on Graham Avenue briefly provided dormitory accommodations for women students.

INSIDE OLD MAIN, EVERY INCH OF SPACE WAS USED, some in ways no one could have predicted. Small, overheated offices were suspended over the tops of stairwells in the north and south wings. A hollow interior space near the north end of the main corridor, intended to house an elevator, was turned into a series of storage rooms, one on each floor. Partitions divided several classrooms in the central section into offices for the growing number of administrators and faculty required as the student population ballooned.



The 1953 completion of a long-planned physical education building next door, now the Moffett Center, freed more space in Old Main but swelling numbers of students and faculty kept the building bursting at the seams. During the early '60s, one calculation revealed that the academic facilities of Old Main were in use more than 94 percent of the available time. Shortages of classroom space made for some very odd schedules for faculty. One faculty member taught in 15 different rooms with no regular pattern during a particularly crowded semester. Students were no more fortunate.



Professor William Clemens leads a biology lab in the 1960s

OLD MAIN REMAINED THE CENTER OF THE CAMPUS.

Through the '40s and '50s and into the '60s, the bookstore in the basement of Old Main was a center of campus activity. In addition to books and supplies, faculty members and students could find a cup of coffee and conversation among the texts. The cafeteria in the north wing basement was another place where faculty and student paths crossed with advantage to both. When Neubig Hall, with its modern dining room, was completed in 1960, the former cafeteria space in the basement of Old Main became a music room. The old kitchen became a coffee shop where faculty from all divisions socialized in an informal setting. The need for more space eventually moved the bookstore from the basement of the south wing down the hill to Neubig Hall into an area formerly used as a lounge and meeting room.

OLD MAIN MEMORY

*"I joined the faculty in
1947 and marveled
at how so much good
could come out of so
little space!!"*

*Dr. Dorothy Arnsdorff,
professor of women's
physical education emerita*

Bookstore staff



OLD MAIN MEMORY

"We used to gather in the
basement cafeteria to have lunch,
play bridge and listen to the
Campus School student teachers
tell their classroom stories."

Diana Bernstein Wolff '59



Students congregate in the
north wing cafeteria—1950s

People also converged in the mailroom of Old Main. In the late '50s, the mailroom was located at the south end of the main corridor next to the stairway leading to the second floor — a space once again being used as a mailroom in the "new" Old Main. When that space proved too small, the mailroom moved to the vacated bookstore area.

A space below the first floor lobby became an informal student center, familiarly and for good reason known as the "Pig Pen." Vending machines provided food and drink and long tables were convenient places to study, eat, or just talk. On the walls around the edge, "mailboxes" with colorful logos on the doors provided communications between student organizations and their members. Down another flight of stairs in the lobby of the Old Main gymnasium, a ping pong game was usually in progress. On the wall, large bulletin boards carried all manner of announcements. Administrators attempted to give the area a new identity by declaring it the "Dragon's Den," but Pig Pen it was and Pig Pen it remained.

When the Memorial Library opened in late 1961, a fire-bucket style hand-to-hand operation moved the library books from the second floor of Old Main to the new building. Completion of the new Van Hoesen Hall

Learning to ski on the slopes of Graham Avenue

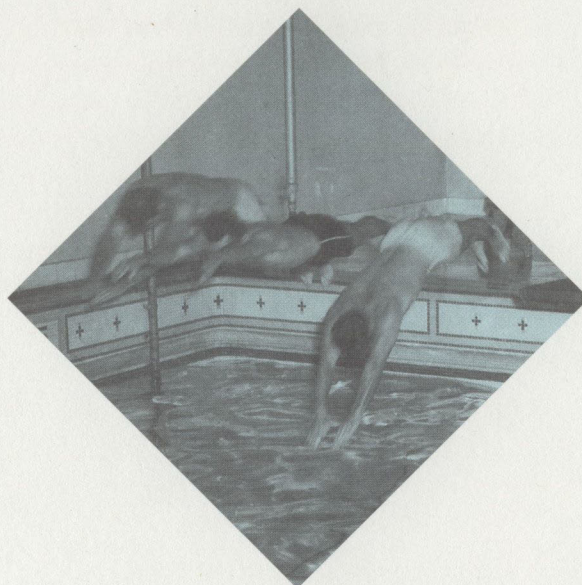


campus school and gymnasium in 1963 left two floors in the north wing of Old Main open to academic uses. Simultaneous construction of the Cornish Hall education building provided classroom and office space for a growing Education Department. The new Bowers Hall offered much-needed scientific classrooms and laboratories just in time to respond to the Sputnik-inspired demand for more and better science teaching. At the same time, it released several laboratory-classrooms to other uses in Old Main. Completion of the Miller Building in 1967 prompted the departure of most administrative functions and opened much of the central section of the building to academic use.

WITH THE CONVERSION OF THE FORMER TEACHERS

college to a college of arts and sciences in the early '60s, Old Main became the center for the liberal arts on campus. Economics, English, foreign languages, history, geography, mathematics, music, political science, philosophy, psychology and sociology were all housed in Old Main. When the Art Department was forced to leave Studio West, the old Overhead Door building located at the other end of the campus, the conversion of the former physical education facilities in Old Main basement provided an answer to their needs. The gymnasium was divided into classroom spaces, the swimming pool was filled in and paved over, and the locker and shower rooms became classrooms and faculty studios.

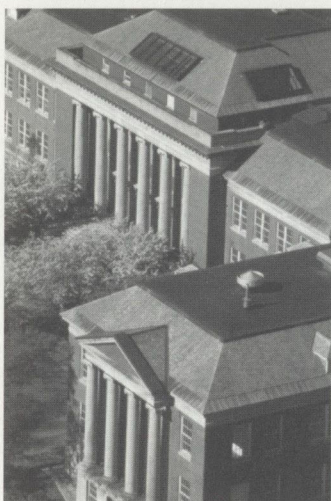
Years of heavy use and a mostly haphazard conversion of old facilities to new uses left the Old Main building in a somewhat tattered state. The addition of modern wiring and electronic communications left tangled webs of cables in every corridor. Pipes for a lately installed sprinkler system were everywhere in evidence. The partitions in many of the converted spaces were not even fire retarding, let alone fire proof. The building's infrastructure was totally outmoded. The electrical system was the end product of hundreds of uncoordinated additions and modifications, the ancient heating system was hard pressed to maintain a constant or comfortable temperature, and the ventilation system didn't work at all.



OLD MAIN MEMORY

"With long, wet hair streaming over my shoulders, I raced from the pool dressing room, two steps at a time, to my favorite art class on the top floor. Those were oh-so-very-many steps! Swimming was required in order to graduate in 1933, my senior year."

Lorena Park Gunn '33



OLD MAIN MEMORY

"In the spring, I loved walking up to Old Main and smelling the apple blossoms on the trees. I also liked sitting on the steps right before class and enjoying the new signs of spring!"

Kim Doody George '88

DISCUSSIONS ABOUT THE RENOVATION OF THE OLD

building began during the 1960s when these strains were already evident and continued intermittently for the next quarter of a century. Committees of faculty and administration, chaired for years by George McDermott of the Geography Department, were charged with planning the needed improvements. The committees submitted fruitless reports almost annually for years. A partial response to these needs came in a campaign to refurbish the auditorium in Old Main which, in 1989, was dedicated to Distinguished Teaching Professor of History Ralph Adams Brown. After all those years of deliberation and recommendations, many were surprised when the renovation actually began in 1992.

Old friends who knew this building in days past will see much that is familiar, like the plaques to former principals Hoose and Cheney in the foyer, and the steps that lead from floor to floor, hollowed out by the tread of thousands of student feet, but will be impressed by much that is new and improved in the refurbished and now-technologically linked building. Sparkling bright reception areas for departmental offices, clusters of faculty offices where classrooms once held sway, the openings in the second and third floors above the foyer, giving a feeling of spaciousness and lightness, an open, skylight-lit exhibition area on the third floor where art classes took place, and a corridor at the subbasement level connecting the north and south wings, where none previously existed, are all visual reminders of the "new" Old Main.

IN 75 YEARS, MUCH HAS CHANGED IN THE WORLD,

in the nation and at the College, but Old Main remains a symbol of all that is solid, stable and unchanging. This historic edifice attests to the College's dedication to provide its students with the best education possible and to give them the opportunity, as the State University motto phrased it, to "become all they are capable of being."

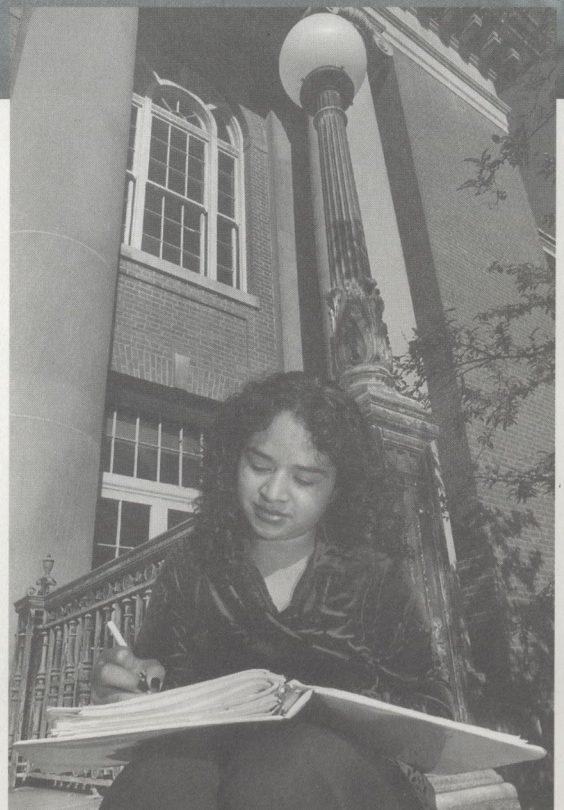


The renovation of Old Main began in 1992



*Through thee we enter larger life,
Thou great, wide, kindly door,
Escape a petty sphere and give
Thee thanks still more and more.*

—Third verse of the Alma Mater



A new generation makes its own
memories of Old Main

Special thanks to Dr. Leonard F. Ralston, professor emeritus of history and author of *Cortland College: An Illustrated History*, for providing the text for this publication.



Cortland

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